

CHAPTER XXX

AFTER-DINNER AND OTHER OCCASIONAL SPEAKING

The perception of the ludicrous is a pledge of sanity.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON, *Essays*.

And let him be sure to leave other men their turns to speak.

—FRANCIS BACON, *Essay on Civil and Moral Discourse*.

Perhaps the most brilliant, and certainly the most entertaining, of all speeches are those delivered on after-dinner and other special occasions. The air of well-fed content in the former, and of expectancy well primed in the latter, furnishes an audience which, though not readily won, is prepared for the best, while the speaker himself is pretty sure to have been chosen for his gifts of oratory.

The first essential of good occasional speaking is to study the occasion. Precisely what is the object of the meeting? How important is the occasion to the audience? How large will the audience be? What sort of people are they? How large is the auditorium? Who selects the speakers' themes? Who else is to speak? What are they to speak about? Precisely how long am I to speak? Who speaks before I do and who follows?

If you want to hit the nail on the head ask such questions as these.¹ No occasional address can succeed unless it fits the occasion to a T. Many prominent men have lost prestige because they were too careless or too busy or too self-confident to respect the occasion and the audience by learning the exact conditions under which they were to speak. Leaving *too* much to the moment is taking a long chance and generally means a less effective speech, if not a failure.

Suitability is the big thing in an occasional speech. When Mark Twain addressed the Army of the Tennessee in reunion at Chicago, in 1877, he

responded to the toast, “The Babies.” Two things in that after-dinner speech are remarkable: the bright introduction, by which he subtly *claimed* the interest of all, and the humorous use of military terms throughout:

Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen: “The Babies.” Now, that’s something like. We haven’t all had the good fortune to be ladies; we have not all been generals, or poets, or statesmen; but when the toast works down to the babies, we stand on common ground—for we’ve all been babies. It is a shame that for a thousand years the world’s banquets have utterly ignored the baby, as if he didn’t amount to anything! If you, gentlemen, will stop and think a minute—if you will go back fifty or a hundred years, to your early married life, and recontemplate your first baby—you will remember that he amounted to a good deal—and even something over.

“As a vessel is known by the sound, whether it be cracked or not,” said Demosthenes, “so men are proved by their speeches whether they be wise or foolish.” Surely the occasional address furnishes a severe test of a speaker’s wisdom. To be trivial on a serious occasion, to be funereal at a banquet, to be long-winded ever—these are the marks of non-sense. Some imprudent souls seem to select the most friendly of after-dinner occasions for the explosion of a bomb-shell of dispute. Around the dinner table it is the custom of even political enemies to bury their hatchets anywhere rather than in some convenient skull. It is the height of bad taste to raise questions that in hours consecrated to good-will can only irritate.

Occasional speeches offer good chances for humor, particularly the funny story, for humor with a genuine point is not trivial. But do not spin a whole skein of humorous yarns with no more connection than the inane and threadbare “And that reminds me.” An anecdote without bearing may be funny but one less funny that fits theme and occasion is far preferable. There is no way, short of sheer power of speech, that so surely leads to the heart of an audience as rich, appropriate humor. The scattered diners in a great banquet hall, the after-dinner lethargy, the anxiety over approaching last-train time, the overfull list of over-full speakers—all throw out a challenge to the speaker to do his best to win an interested hearing. And when success does come it is usually due to a happy mixture of

seriousness and humor, for humor alone rarely scores so heavily as the two combined, while the utterly grave speech *never* does on such occasions.

If there is one place more than another where secondhand opinions and platitudes are unwelcome it is in the after-dinner speech. Whether you are toast-master or the last speaker to try to hold the waning crowd at midnight, be as original as you can. How is it possible to summarize the qualities that go to make up the good after-dinner speech, when we remember the inimitable serious-drollery of Mark Twain, the sweet southern eloquence of Henry W. Grady, the funereal gravity of the humorous Charles Battell Loomis, the charm of Henry Van Dyke, the geniality of F. Hopkinson Smith, and the all-round delightfulness of Chauncey M. Depew? America is literally rich in such gladsome speakers, who punctuate real sense with nonsense, and so make both effective.

Commemorative occasions, unveilings, commencements, dedications, eulogies, and all the train of special public gatherings, offer rare opportunities for the display of tact and good sense in handling occasion, theme, and audience. When to be dignified and when colloquial, when to soar and when to ramble arm in arm with your hearers, when to flame and when to soothe, when to instruct and when to amuse—in a word, the whole matter of APPROPRIATENESS must constantly be in mind lest you write your speech on water.

Finally, remember the beatitude: Blessed is the man that maketh short speeches, for he shall be invited to speak again.

SELECTIONS FOR STUDY

LAST DAYS OF THE CONFEDERACY

(Extract)

The Rapidan suggests another scene to which allusion has often been made since the war, but which, as illustrative also of the spirit of both armies, I may be permitted to recall in this connection. In the mellow twilight of an April day the two

armies were holding their dress parades on the opposite hills bordering the river. At the close of the parade a magnificent brass band of the Union army played with great spirit the patriotic airs, "Hail Columbia," and "Yankee Doodle." Whereupon the Federal troops responded with a patriotic shout. The same band then played the soul-stirring strains of "Dixie," to which a mighty response came from ten thousand Southern troops. A few moments later, when the stars had come out as witnesses and when all nature was in harmony, there came from the same band the old melody, "Home, Sweet Home." As its familiar and pathetic notes rolled over the water and thrilled through the spirits of the soldiers, the hills reverberated with a thundering response from the united voices of both armies. What was there in this old, old music, to so touch the chords of sympathy, so thrill the spirits and cause the frames of brave men to tremble with emotion? It was the thought of home. To thousands, doubtless, it was the thought of that Eternal Home to which the next battle might be the gateway. To thousands of others it was the thought of their dear earthly homes, where loved ones at that twilight hour were bowing round the family altar, and asking God's care over the absent soldier boy.

—GENERAL J. B. GORDON, C. S. A.

WELCOME TO KOSSUTH

(Extract)

Let me ask you to imagine that the contest, in which the United States asserted their independence of Great Britain, had been unsuccessful; that our armies, through treason or a league of tyrants against us, had been broken and scattered; that the great men who led them, and who swayed our councils—our Washington, our Franklin, and the venerable president of the American Congress—had been driven forth as exiles. If there had existed at that day, in any part of the civilized world, a powerful Republic, with institutions resting on the same foundations of liberty which our own countrymen sought to establish, would there have been in that Republic any hospitality too cordial, any sympathy too deep, any zeal for their glorious but unfortunate cause, too fervent or too active to be shown toward these illustrious fugitives? Gentlemen, the case I have supposed is before you. The Washingtons, the Franklins, the Hancocks of Hungary, driven out by a far worse tyranny than was ever endured here, are wanderers in foreign lands. Some of them have sought a refuge in our country—one sits with this company our guest to-night—and we must measure the duty we owe them by the same standard which we would have had history apply, if our ancestors had met with a fate like theirs.

—WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT.

THE INFLUENCE OF UNIVERSITIES

(Extract)

When the excitement of party warfare presses dangerously near our national safeguards, I would have the intelligent conservatism of our universities and colleges warn the contestants in impressive tones against the perils of a breach impossible to repair.

When popular discontent and passion are stimulated by the arts of designing partisans to a pitch perilously near to class hatred or sectional anger, I would have our universities and colleges sound the alarm in the name of American brotherhood and fraternal dependence.

When the attempt is made to delude the people into the belief that their suffrages can change the operation of national laws, I would have our universities and colleges proclaim that those laws are inexorable and far removed from political control.

When selfish interest seeks undue private benefits through governmental aid, and public places are claimed as rewards of party service, I would have our universities and colleges persuade the people to a relinquishment of the demand for party spoils and exhort them to a disinterested and patriotic love of their government, whose unperverted operation secures to every citizen his just share of the safety and prosperity it holds in store for all.

I would have the influence of these institutions on the side of religion and morality. I would have those they send out among the people not ashamed to acknowledge God, and to proclaim His interposition in the affairs of men, enjoining such obedience to His laws as makes manifest the path of national perpetuity and prosperity—GROVER CLEVELAND, delivered at the Princeton Sesqui-Centennial, 1896.

EULOGY OF GARFIELD (Extract)

Great in life, he was surpassingly great in death. For no cause, in the very frenzy of wantonness and wickedness, by the red hand of murder, he was thrust from the full tide of this world's interest, from its hopes, its aspirations, its victories, into the visible presence of death—and he did not quail. Not alone for the one short moment in which, stunned and dazed, he could give up life, hardly aware of its relinquishment, but through days of deadly languor, through weeks of agony, that was not less agony because silently borne, with clear sight and calm courage, he looked into his open grave. What blight and ruin met his anguished eyes, whose lips may tell—what brilliant, broken plans, what baffled, high ambitions, what sundering of strong, warm, manhood's friendships, what bitter rending of sweet household ties! Behind him a proud, expectant nation, a great host of sustaining friends, a cherished and happy mother, wearing the full rich honors of her early toil and tears; the wife of his youth, whose whole life lay in his; the little boys not yet emerged from childhood's day of frolic; the fair young daughter; the sturdy sons just springing into closest companionship, claiming every day and every day rewarding a father's love and care; and in his heart the eager, rejoicing power to meet all demand. Before him, desolation and great darkness! And his soul was not shaken. His countrymen were thrilled with instant, profound and universal sympathy. Masterful in his mortal weakness, he became the centre of a nation's love, enshrined in the prayers of a world. But all the love and all the sympathy could not share with him his suffering. He trod the wine press alone. With unfaltering front

he faced death. With unfailing tenderness he took leave of life. Above the demoniac hiss of the assassin's bullet he heard the voice of God. With simple resignation he bowed to the Divine decree. —JAMES G. BLAINE, delivered at the memorial service held by the U. S. Senate and House of Representatives.

EULOGY OF LEE (Extract)

At the bottom of all true heroism is unselfishness. Its crowning expression is sacrifice. The world is suspicious of vaunted heroes. But when the true hero has come, and we know that here he is in verity, ah! how the hearts of men leap forth to greet him! how worshipfully we welcome God's noblest work—the strong, honest, fearless, upright man. In Robert Lee was such a hero vouchsafed to us and to mankind, and whether we behold him declining command of the federal army to fight the battles and share the miseries of his own people; proclaiming on the heights in front of Gettysburg that the fault of the disaster was his own; leading charges in the crisis of combat; walking under the yoke of conquest without a murmur of complaint; or refusing fortune to come here and train the youth of his country in the paths of duty,—he is ever the same meek, grand, self-sacrificing spirit. Here he exhibited qualities not less worthy and heroic than those displayed on the broad and open theater of conflict, when the eyes of nations watched his every action. Here in the calm repose of civil and domestic duties, and in the trying routine of incessant tasks, he lived a life as high as when, day by day, he marshalled and led his thin and wasting lines, and slept by night upon the field that was to be drenched again in blood upon the morrow. And now he has vanished from us forever. And is this all that is left of him—this handful of dust beneath the marble stone? No! the ages answer as they rise from the gulfs of time, where lie the wrecks of kingdoms and estates, holding up in their hands as their only trophies, the names of those who have wrought for man in the love and fear of God, and in love-unfearing for their fellow-men. No! the present answers, bending by his tomb. No! the future answers as the breath of the morning fans its radiant brow, and its soul drinks in sweet inspirations from the lovely life of Lee. No! methinks the very heavens echo, as melt into their depths the words of reverent love that voice the hearts of men to the tingling stars.

Come we then to-day in loyal love to sanctify our memories, to purify our hopes, to make strong all good intent by communion with the spirit of him who, being dead yet speaketh. Come,

child, in thy spotless innocence; come, woman, in thy purity; come, youth, in thy prime; come, manhood, in thy strength; come, age, in thy ripe wisdom; come, citizen; come, soldier; let us strew the roses and lilies of June around his tomb, for he, like them, exhaled in his life Nature's beneficence, and the grave has consecrated that life and given it to us all; let us crown his tomb with the oak, the emblem of his strength, and with the laurel, the emblem of his glory, and let these guns, whose voices he knew of old, awake the echoes of the mountains, that nature herself may join in his solemn requiem. Come, for here he rests, and

On this green bank, by this fair stream,
We set to-day a votive stone,

That memory may his deeds redeem,
When, like our sires, our sons are gone.

—JOHN WARWICK DANIEL, on the
unveiling of Lee's statue at Washington and
Lee University, Lexington, Virginia, 1883.

QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

1. Why should humor find a place in after-dinner speaking?
2. Briefly give your impressions of any notable after-dinner address that you have heard.
3. Briefly outline an imaginary occasion of any sort and give three subjects appropriate for addresses.
4. Deliver one such address, not to exceed ten minutes in length.
5. What proportion of emotional ideas do you find in the extracts given in this chapter?
6. Humor was used in some of the foregoing addresses—in which others would it have been inappropriate?
7. Prepare and deliver an after-dinner speech suited to one of the following occasions, and be sure to use humor:
 - A lodge banquet.
 - A political party dinner.
 - A church men's club dinner.
 - A civic association banquet.
 - A banquet in honor of a celebrity.
 - A woman's club annual dinner.
 - A business men's association dinner.
 - A manufacturers' club dinner.
 - An alumni banquet.
 - An old home week barbecue.